

Item One

Bass guitar is the term usually used for an electric or acoustic bass. The bass resembles a guitar, but it has a larger body, longer neck, and a lower pitch. With some exceptions, the bass is a four-stringed instrument.

The bass is played with the fingers, including the thumb, as well as a pick, or plectrum. Electric bass provides what is known as the boom, thump, or bottom in most modern music. Categories of music where the electric bass is common include hip hop, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, country, and jazz.

Item Two

James Jamerson was a virtuoso¹ bass player known for his contribution to the “Motown Sound” of the 1960s. Jamerson’s distinctive thump provided the backbone for classic singles such as “My Girl,” “Dancing in the Street,” “I Was Made to Love Her,” and “What’s Going On.”

A native of South Carolina, Jamerson moved to Detroit, the home of Motown, in 1959. He was first hired to perform on stage behind Motown singers. In 1964, he became the bassist of choice for the record label’s founder, Berry Gordy. Jamerson helped anchor the Motown studio band that came to be called “The Funk Brothers.”

Jamerson’s health began to suffer in the late 1970s. He died in 1983 at the age of 45. Seventeen years later, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

1. **virtuoso:** a musician with great talent and taste

Item Three

“Now I know you kids are not musicians,” Mr. Bruce said, cleaning his glasses with the tail of his shirt. “So I’ll go slowly. If you have any questions, just ask.”

“The electric bass has only four strings—more or less the same as the four lowest strings on a six-string guitar. I’ll try to keep it simple,” he said, yawning.

“Those four strings give us the bass line, the lowest notes. Now, you normally think of bass as background. But in fact, the bass sets up the harmonics that all the other parts of a song need to fit into it—including the tune, or melody.”

“Harmonics are, well,” Mr. Bruce rubbed his lip with his thumb and forefinger and stared out the second-floor window. “Harmonics are a combination of tones or pitches that go into creating a single note.”

He reached for a piece of chalk. “And harmonics give a note its color by—” A girl at the back of the class raised her hand. “Yes, Dianne?” Mr. Bruce asked.

“I thought you were going to keep it simple,” Dianne said.